

STATEMENT CONCERNING STATE EDUCATION LAW

At the close of the 1950 session, the New York State Legislature passed an amendment to the State Education Law which permits pupils to be excused from the study of health and hygiene if their parents or guardians object to this instruction on the ground that it conflicts with the tenets of their religion.

This amendment has become a part of the law of the State. In accordance with the new statute, the Department of Education has directed school principals to excuse children of the Christian Science faith from courses dealing with health subjects if their parents or guardians so request. Moreover, the Department of Education has indicated that "Required sections of the Regents' examination as well as the State Scholarship examinations will be constructed so as not to penalize pupils who have been excused from instruction in the specified units of study."

Teachers of the biological sciences report that the application of this law creates numerous difficulties. It disrupts the orderly teaching of biology and hygiene, the basis of modern sanitation and public health. It may prove to be an obstacle to college entrance not only for Christian Scientists but for all pupils, who may be inclined to neglect the biological sciences related to public health because these subjects are excluded from examinations.

The whole structure of protective procedures against smallpox, yellow fever, diphtheria and many other communicable diseases, and the safeguarding of our water

and milk as well as other foods rests on well established biological facts. Such facts must be made known to every school child for proper orientation in natural and social phenomena. Ignorance of the reasons for community action in the field of scientific and public health procedures is a potential source of danger to the community. A sound training in the fundamentals of the biological sciences is essential to an understanding of the principles underlying the rules of personal hygiene and of public health.

Generally accepted scientific knowledge should be part of our children's educational heritage, and no one should deprive them of it. The very fact that some pupils are excused from the acquisition of essential knowledge and from answering questions pertaining to it is likely to have a bad effect on others; it tends to lower the level of health and hygiene teaching throughout the State. It is unsound to permit any group to interfere with the progress of education, especially the teaching of the fundamentals of biology and of public and personal hygiene. The restriction imposed by this amendment is particularly unfortunate at a time when the nation is straining its potentialities to the utmost to organize its material and human resources to defend its very existence.

In the interest of sound education and the protection of the public health and welfare, The New York Academy of Medicine urges the repeal of this amendment to the Education Law.

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* Issued by The Committee on Public Health Relations of The New York Academy of Medicine.